

## INTRODUCTION



Don DeLillo

(1936- )

The author of challenging novels about contemporary mass culture, Don DeLillo stands with the most important of living American fiction writers. Born in the Bronx, New York, on November 20, 1936, he received a B.A. from Fordham University in 1958. His background from then until publication of *Americana* in 1971 is sketchy at best. Indeed, DeLillo carefully guards his privacy and has granted few interviews, so little is known about his background. His first published story appeared in 1960, and during the subsequent decade six additional short stories appeared in major literary journals such as *Epoch* and *The Kenyon Review*, as well as in magazines such as *Esquire*. During the 1980s, DeLillo won several major awards, a 1984 Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; a 1985 American Book Award for *White Noise*, and a 1988 American Book Award nomination for *Libra*.

Reared in a Catholic environment and educated at a Jesuit university, DeLillo writes fiction concerned with the secularization of myth and ritual in contemporary mass culture. Thus he works in a tradition of American novel writing that leads from Nathanael West to Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon, with whom he is often compared. Each of his novels decodes a particular system by which contemporary man seeks the comfort of a totalizing order, but always amid the onslaught of entropic, catastrophic forces. DeLillo focuses on complex structures of thought colliding with life's ultimacies: randomness, the arbitrariness of language, violence, and death. These clashes are typically staged in tableaux of a sacrificial violence that eerily mimes the entropies of nature, an ironic reminder that man's rage for order contains the viruses of that very disorder he so desires to surmount.

DeLillo's career has unfolded in three major phases. The first, in which he published three novels in as many years, concerns the ordering technologies of American mass culture: cinematography in *Americana*, sports in *End Zone*, and popular music in *Great Jones Street*. All three novels are notable for their satire on the absurdities and paranoias of life in Middle America. In each, the first-person narration and episodic plotting brings into play a large cast of secondary characters; also in each, the protagonists seek more authentic versions of themselves in exile from mass culture, only to recenter it out of resignation and with an idea of subverting its discourses.

When *Ratner's Star* appeared after a three-year hiatus, nothing in DeLillo's previous novels had prepared readers for the depth and breadth of its scientific allusions. His longest and most ambitious work, before *Libra*, *Ratner's Star* focuses on a fourteen-year-old Nobel Prize winner in mathematics who is assigned to decode an extraterrestrial signal apparently sent from a planet circling Ratner's star. Working at the Center for the Refinement of Ideational Structures, Billy Twillig is surrounded by a huge cast of

eccentrics who can well be read as part of a vast, Swiftian satire on contemporary theoretical science. Tom LeClair has also shown that the novel is elaborately plotted around both a history of mathematics and a dyadic structure of chapters. Indeed, DeLillo's next two novels can also be read as paired opposites; in *Players*, adults engage in degenerative, childish games of espionage and sexual liberation; in *Running Dog*, this play is displaced by the strictest technologies of patriarchal power.

In his third phases, DeLillo turns more explicitly to the rites of power and sacrifice embedded in contemporary society. *The Names* focuses on a mystical cult of exiled Americans operating in a Mediterranean theater backlit by fears of international terrorism, while *White Noise* returns to the United States and the oblique satire of the novelist's early work: His narrator, the chairman of a university's "Department of Hitler Studies," veers into a personal nightmare of mass cultural life that miniatures the horrors of Nazism he has studied. It was DeLillo's breakthrough novel, and with *Libra* it shares an ironic view of the complexities, responsibilities, and finally the limits of historiography. *Libra's* framing character is a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative trying impossibly to compose the story, twenty-five years after the fact, of Lee Harvey Oswald's apparent assassination of President John F. Kennedy. As in all DeLillo's most powerful work, these two novels foreground, by metafictional devices, the problematics of man's desires for order, or plot. As DeLillo writes in *Libra*, "The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death."

For DeLillo's protagonists, deconstructing this "deathward logic" of systematic thought typically ends in ambiguous stabs at reconstructing experience through childish modes of action. *The Names* concludes with the prelogical narrative of a gifted boy; *White Noise* concludes with the death-defying and randomized excursion of a preverbal toddler who rides his tricycle onto the freeway. In fact, children (or childish adults) loom large throughout DeLillo's work. Oriented to seemingly rational, adult systems by way of games, whether local or global, a simple sport of a complex of international espionage, they discover codifications of rules and possibilities for simulating order and dominance--and language is the primal game. Always in DeLillo, therefore, when language fails, a kind of elemental violence follows. Out of this represented chaos or sacrificial terror, human history emerges.

Recognition of DeLillo's importance was slow to come. For years his novels were widely praised by reviewers and a small group of academicians, but they fell short of commercial success. The honors for *White Noise* and *Libra* marked a turning point in his career. He is now universally acclaimed for his acute renderings of American speech and for illustrating American consumer society and its recent cultural history. Among the generation that includes such widely known novelists as Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Joan Didion, Joseph McElroy, and Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo was late in coming to prominence but is now regarded as a major novelist who is in many ways more inventive than his peers.

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